

THE BUDDHIST WAY TO ECONOMIC STABILITY

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he word '*Manussa*,' man, had different etymological meanings given it by eastern scholars in the past. While popular or general Indian tradition traces the origin of the word to '*Manu*' the mythical progenitor of the human race, in the Buddhist texts the derivation of the word is given as '*manassa-ussannataya=manussa*' – man, because of his highly developed state of mind (as compared to the under-developed or rudimentary mental state of the lower animal). According to Buddhist thought man ranks as the highest of beings due to the vast potential of the human mind.

'Kautilya's Arthasastra' and *'Brhaspati's Arthasastra'* – two famous ancient treatises on economics – were both written after the Buddha's lifetime. They held one common feature, and that, – under title of '*Arthasastra*'

both writers had written on politics and economics, leaving out the most important factor, of ethics and the moral development of man himself.

Of the Pali term '*Attha*' (–Sanskrit '*artha*') – which has more than one meaning according to Buddhism, the word as signifying success is used at two separate levels, i.e. '*attha*' meaning success, and '*uttamattha*' meaning the highest success. The latter concerns man's mental and spiritual development resulting in the realization of supramundane knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, – in the conquest of Self and attainment to spiritual perfection or Arahant hood.

Generally speaking, the word '*attha*' as success, relates to the various aspects of man's socio-economic development – such as the economy, politics, education, health, law and morality of a society. It refers to social progress due to the harmonious unification of all the above factors, contributing to the prosperity and peaceful co-existence of a people.

Except in the case of legal administration of the Sangha, no single discourse of the Buddha deals fully on any one of the above factors of social progress. Yet reading through the numerous discourses (or Suttas) it is possible to develop a fully consistent and complete view-point of the Buddha's stand on each of the above topics drawn from the various discourses of the Buddha. A socio-economic system based on Buddhist principles and practices could easily be formulated to suit today's modern progressive society.

In recent times many books have been written on the subject of economics and economic theory, all of them either from the Capitalist or Socialist point of view. Neither of these systems pay attention to, nor consider the inner development of man as an important factor in the growth of society. Hence there has been a rapid deterioration in human values and standards of behaviour in all classes of society. Science and technology have taken gigantic strides forward to send man to the moon, and it will not be long before he visits other planets. But fears are expressed that if the present trend towards moral degeneration continues, before long it would be impossible to differentiate human action from that of the animal. This fear is not baseless. It would be a great tragedy indeed were man to turn beast even in one of the many bestial aspects of behaviour belonging to the lower animals. Thus what the world requires today is a socially stable economic system which yields the highest place to man's moral development and cultivation of human values.

The Buddha lived in a society entangled and confused by sixty-two divergent views and one hundred and eight types of craving. There were hundreds who went about in search of an escape from this entanglement of views. Once the Buddha was asked the question:— (*Jata Sutta*)

“The inner tangle and the outer tangle –
This world is entangled in a tangle.

Who succeeds in disentangling
this tangle?”

The Buddha who explained that all these tangles
have mind as the fore-runner, answered thus –

“When a wise man, established well in virtue,
Develops consciousness and understanding,
Then as a bhikkhu ardent and sagacious
He succeeds in disentangling this tangle.”

Realising the importance of the external factors in
man’s endeavour towards disentangling himself from the
inner tangle, the Buddha gave many discourses on the
ways and means of overcoming the outer tangle. Some
of these teachings were meant only for the bhikkhus.
Others were only for laymen. The rest were meant for
both bhikkhus and laymen, although in the latter case,
the discourses were mainly directed to the bhikkhus. In
one such discourse, he approved the acceptance by the
bhikkhus of the four requisites namely robes, food, shelter
and medicine. Man could live without all other modern
contraptions but for life to go on, these four requisites
are essential. Wealth is required by man to obtain these
four requisites and to meet his other needs.

The Noble Eightfold Path which could be
classified under right values and right action, enables
man to achieve the highest ends. For economic stability
and well-being, the Buddhist system stresses three

factors in the *Vyagghapajja Sutta*.

1. *Utthana Sampada* – Production of wealth through skilled and earnest endeavour.
2. *Arakkha Sampada* – Its protection and savings.
3. *Samajivikata* – Living within one's means.

1. *Utthana Sampada* –

The Buddha when encouraging the production of wealth makes special reference to six job ranges prevalent at that time:

1. Agriculture
2. Trade
3. Cattle breeding
4. Defence services
5. Government services
6. Professional services

India was predominantly an agricultural country. Hence many references in the discourses were made to agriculture. For example in the '*Sadapunnappavaddhana Sutta*' it is mentioned that providing of irrigation facilities results in yielding continuous merit. In the '*Samyutta Nikaya*' it is mentioned that the greatest asset for agriculture is cattle, while in the '*Sutta Nipatha*' cattle

from whom man obtains milk, ghee, curd, butter and whey, of much nutritious value, are described as the best friends of a country. In developing countries, water and draught power provided by cattle, are basic needs for agriculture.

In the discourse pertaining to a layman's happiness (domestic and otherwise) (*Gahapati Sukha*), foremost is mentioned the satisfaction derived by a layman from the possession of wealth obtained through righteous means. (*Atthi Sukha*). However, the Buddha warns man against the tendency to become a slave to the mere accumulation of wealth for its own sake. This would lead to both physical and mental suffering later. Adequate means of livelihood to support oneself and family, to help relatives and friends, and to distribute among the needy and the deserving, would lead to contentment and inner satisfaction. This in turn would result in the moral and spiritual development of man.

In the '*Kutadanta Sutta*' the Buddha shows how peace and prosperity and freedom from crime comes to a country through the equitable distribution of wealth among its people.

He says 'Long ago, O Brahman, there was a king by name Wide-realm (*Maha-Vijita*), mighty with great wealth and large property with stores of silver and gold, of aids to enjoyment, of goods and corn; with his treasure houses and his garner full. Now when King Wide-realm was once sitting alone in meditation he became anxious at the thought: "I have in abundance all the good things

a mortal can enjoy. The whole wide circle of the earth is mine by conquest to possess.' 'Twere well if I were to offer a great sacrifice that should ensure me weal and welfare for many days."

And he had the Brahman, his chaplain, called; and telling him all that he had thought, he said: "So I would fain, O Brahman, offer a great sacrifice – let the venerable one instruct me how – for my weal and my welfare for many days."

Thereupon the Brahman who was chaplain said to the king: "The king's country, Sire, is harassed and harried. There are dacoits abroad who pillage the villages and townships, and who make the roads unsafe. Were the king, so long as that is so, to levy a fresh tax, verily his majesty would be acting wrongly. But perchance his majesty might think: I'll soon put a stop to these scoundrels' game by degradation and banishment, and fines and bonds and death! But their licence cannot be satisfactorily put a stop to do so. The remnant left unpunished would still go on harassing the realm. Now there is one method to adopt to put a thorough end to this disorder. Whosoever, there be in the king's realm who devote themselves to keeping cattle and the farm, to them let his majesty the king give food and seed corn. Whosoever, there be in the king's realm who devote themselves to trade, to them let his majesty the king give wages and food. Then those men, following each his own business, will no longer harass the realm; the king's revenue will go up; the country will be quiet and at peace;

and the populace, pleased one with another and happy, dancing their children in their arms, will dwell with open doors.”

Then King Wide-realm, O Brahman, accepted the word of his chaplain, and did as he had said. And the men, following their business, harassed the realm no more. And the king’s revenue went up. And the country became quiet and at peace. And the populace, pleased one with another and happy, dancing their children in their arms, dwelt with open doors.

So King Wide-realm had his chaplain called, and said: ‘The disorder is at an end. The country is at peace.’
(–*Dialogues of the Buddha – Part I, pages 175 & 176*).

2. *Arakkha Samapada* –

This means the worldly happiness derived from the constant protection of one’s wealth (that has been righteously obtained) from burglary, fire, floods etc. As the Buddha has extolled the virtue of savings, this factor too could be considered in this context.

Obtaining money on credit (or loans) was prevalent even during the Buddha’s time. Persons like Anathapindika were the bankers of the day. The Buddhist texts make references to instances where he gave loans both to the state as well as to ordinary people. However, Buddhism does not approve of excessive borrowing for as the saying goes “borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry” – and the Buddha’s advocacy of a life free from debts (*anana sukha*) as being conducive to the

happiness of a layman supports this statement.

In the '*Samannaphala Sutta*,' the Buddha compares the *Samannaphala* (or fruit of a recluse's life) to the happiness derived by a person, who having been in debt frees himself of all his debts, and now supports his family and children from the savings he has managed to put aside. The importance of making savings from one's earnings is stressed in this manner. In general, the Buddha gives details of the proper use of one's earnings. But in the '*Sigalovada Sutta*,' He admonishes particularly a big magnate, Sigala to apportion his savings into four and to spend one part of it for his daily upkeep and that of his family. Two portions were to be invested in his business; and the fourth put aside for any emergency.

3. *Samajivikata* -

This is the third of the three basic principles in the Buddhist Economic system. A person should spend reasonably in proportion to his income, neither too much nor too little. In the discourse relating to the householders' happiness (*gahapati sukha*) enjoyment of one's income appropriately and wisely (*bhoga sukha*) is given as one of the four factors conducive to lay happiness.

In the "*Pattakamma Sutta*" the manner in which a person should spend his wealth is given in detail as follows:-

1. Expenditure on food and clothing and other needs.

2. Maintenance of parents, wife and children and servants.
3. For illness and other emergencies.
4. For charitable purposes.
5. For the performance of the following:–
 - i. treating one's relatives;
 - ii. treating one's visitors;
 - iii. offering alms in memory of the departed;
 - iv. offering merit to the deities;
 - v. payment of state taxes and dues in time.

The Buddha extols simple living as being more conducive to the development of one's mind. A society progresses to the extent the mind of the individual is developed. Administration of such a society becomes easier, when law and order is well established. Knowing this, ancient kings in Sri Lanka gave much publicity to the contents of the '*Ariyavamsa Sutta*.' In this *Sutta*, preached by the Buddha for the benefit of the bhikkhus, the latter are exhorted to be contented with –

1. The robes (clothes) they receive (whether coarse or fine).
2. Alms (food) they receive (whether unpalatable or delicious).
3. The abodes (houses) they receive (whether simple or luxurious).
4. Meditation (development of mind).

Becoming content with the first three it is possible to reduce economic restlessness, and at the same time

to inculcate the habits and values of simple living. Through meditation the human mind develops itself both morally and spiritually, resulting in reducing social disharmony and insurrection which arise first in the minds of men and then put into action. Peace and progress of a country is thus assured.

In this modern world although highly advanced in science and technology, with its rapid expansion of knowledge, there appears to be a steady deterioration of human values. Present day politics, the economy, and educational systems are some of the more important reasons for this state of affairs. In this context it is considered desirable that the existing political and economic thought and educational systems should be changed so as to give priority to the development of human values.

Buddhism is both a path of emancipation and a way of life. As a way of life it interacts with the economic, political and social beliefs and practices of the people. It is felt that the time is now most opportune to make known to the world each of the above aspects of society within the framework of Buddhist Ethics and the basic principles of Buddhism. The progress of a country depends ultimately on the progress of the individual. Over 2500 years ago, the Buddha was born into a confused society entangled in various views regarding life and thought in general. Through Buddhism it was possible to disentangle this tangle of views and to reduce this confusion. Today too, in *This Confused Society* it is

generally believed that Buddhism could again help in lighting a path through the darkness of this confusion.

